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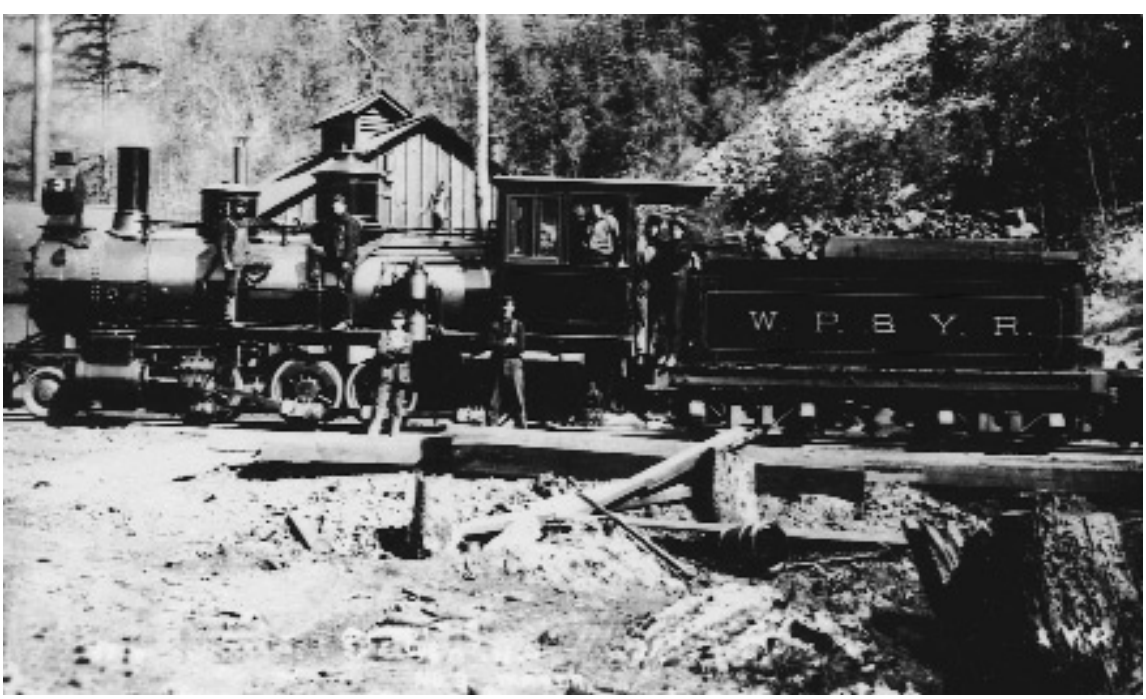
Alaska Tourism, Skagway, and the White Pass and Yukon Route

Today, tourism rules supreme throughout southeastern Alaska. More than 300,000 cruise ship passengers take the well-known "Inside Passage" route each summer, and more than a 100,000 other tourists see the state's "panhandle" by air, ferry, and road. Visitors overwhelm residents for weeks at a time in the downtown areas of Skagway, Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka, attracted as they are by the region's justifiably world-famous scenery, wildlife, Native culture, and both Russian and early American history.

At Skagway, located at the northern end of the Inside Passage, summertime tourism is clearly big business. Several days per week, four or even five large cruise ships plus a ferry and innumerable small planes descend on the village, and the town's population can swell to four or five times its normal size. Tourists browse the gift shops or take a town tour and, as a highlight of their visit, they hop aboard the well-known White Pass and Yukon Route railroad and head north to the top of spectacular White Pass or perhaps continue on to Bennett, British Columbia.

Towns elsewhere in southeastern Alaska often seem overwhelmed by all the summertime commotion, because large-scale tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon. In Skagway, however, tourism is as old as the town itself. Tourists have been visiting Skagway for more than 100 years. In 1900, as today, tourists have been admiring the town's quaint architecture, wandering its streets and avenues, drifting into its gift shops, and riding the remarkably scenic White Pass railroad.

Skagway's history is inseparable from that of the world-famous Klondike gold rush. In the summer of 1896, when gold was discovered near the Klondike River in the Yukon River basin, Skagway was only a homestead occupied by one family. A wild-eyed visionary, "Captain" William Moore, and his family had settled there in 1887 because he firmly believed that the Yukon basin would eventually yield large amounts of gold.



Shortly after the first tracks were laid for the White Pass and Yukon Route railway, in the summer of 1898, the first locomotives arrived in Skagway. Not long afterward, the line hauled its first load of tourists—on flat cars—on a four-mile excursion to the end of track.

Few believed him, but 10 years later, Moore's dreams came to fruition—in spades—when tens of thousands of "stampeders" waded ashore and began streaming north to the Yukon. By the fall of 1897 more than 3,000 people had engulfed his homestead, and by the spring of 1898 Skagway was Alaska's largest city. Throughout the mad winter of 1897-98, the route over the mountains north of town was tortuous and slow; to improve the route, some entrepreneurs built wagon roads or tramway lines while others ran pack trains. Skagway, the base of the White Pass trail, was involved in a desperate race for survival with nearby Dyea, at the southern end of the Chilkoot Trail. For most of that winter, the towns along the Chilkoot clearly had the upper hand, and Dyea poised on the verge of victory.

But in April 1898, a chance meeting in a Skagway hotel radically tipped the balance between the two port towns. Thomas Tancred, a London financier, visited the area in hopes of bankrolling a railroad, but he quickly became convinced that building a route over either pass was technically impossible. (Several others before him had reluctantly come to the same conclusion.) But Mike Heney, a contractor familiar with the verities of railroad construction, was also in town. Heney had recently returned from a reconnaissance of the two trails and, unlike the others, was certain that a narrow gauge railroad could be built from Skagway to the top of White Pass. Legend has it that Heney and Tancred met, quite coincidentally, one afternoon; they talked all evening and well into the wee hours, and by the following dawn they had cemented a deal to finance and build what would become known as the White Pass and Yukon Route railroad.

Construction of the railroad began in late May 1898, and by mid-June, crews of workers were laying rails down the center of Broadway, Skagway's primary north-south street. Fueled by a readily available work force running into the thousands and by ample supplies of cash from British investors, the rails quickly advanced up Skagway Valley. By July 21, the line—now two miles long—opened to passenger and freight traffic, and a month later, rails extended an additional two miles toward White Pass. Soon after, however, construction was slowed by a combination of factors: steep grades, precipitous terrain, news of a mining strike in nearby Atlin, B.C. (which siphoned off hundreds of workers), and the onset of winter—grim even by Alaskan standards—which brought subfreezing temperatures, a shortened workday, and more than 30 feet of snow at the higher elevations. Railroad officials, however, pressed on, and on February 4, 1899, the crowd—and a railroad train—gathered at White Pass summit (20 miles north of Skagway) to celebrate. The horrors of White Pass and the infamous "Dead Horse Trail," where more than 3,000 horses had perished just a year earlier, had finally been overcome.

The celebration having concluded, construction resumed—slowly at first due to the frigid, snowbound conditions, then more quickly as signs of spring began to emerge. North of White Pass, the line was in Canada, and railroad officials, having obtained legal access from the Interior Ministry, began laying track north toward the Yukon River. On July 6, 1899, another celebration was in order when rails were laid another 20 miles to the shores of Bennett Lake. Here, at the northern end of the Chilkoot and White Pass trails, thousands of miners had gathered just a year earlier to begin a long boat journey to the gold fields. Before the rails reached there, Bennett was still an active trail town; the completion of the railroad to that point, however, rang the death knell to traffic on both trails.

By July 1899, steel rails had conquered the rugged Coast Mountains, and the worst obstacles had been overcome. But less than half of the 110-mile route had been constructed. To complete the line, railroad officials divided their forces in two: one group of workers built north from Bennett City (at the south end of Bennett Lake) to the far end of the 25-mile-long lake, while the other group headed north to the line's projected terminus, along the Yukon River, and started laying rails to the south. Neither crew encountered substantial difficulties, and by late July 1900, the remaining 70 miles of track had been completed. On July 29, 1900, a railroad official drove a "golden spike" at Carcross, at the northern end of Bennett Lake. The White Pass and Yukon Route (WP&YR) railroad—a line that many swore could never be completed—was now an accomplished fact.

The Klondike gold rush, in full swing when railroad construction began, was over by the summer of 1900. Those attracted to the fervor of gold rush riches had migrated, by this time, to Nome in far-off western Alaska, while in the Klondike gold fields, the claims of individual

The White Pass and Yukon Route, built from Skagway north to Whitehorse beginning in 1898, was headquartered in these buildings for more than 70 years. In 1981, before restoration efforts began, they were rapidly deteriorating.

miners were rapidly being bought out by corporations which were intent on mass production methods. In the Klondike, there was no easy gold for the taking.

The railroad was, however, perfectly positioned to reap the harvest of another "gold rush" that promised even greater rewards. Alaska tourism, in 1900, was still a small-scale industry; less than 20 years old, it was the exclusive province of steamship carriers who operated several excursions each summer through the straits and inlets of southeastern Alaska's "Inside Passage." Before "Klondike fever" had transformed the north country, the tourist route had wound north to Juneau, then headed off to Glacier Bay. But the gold rush, and the publicity it engendered, made tourists as well as the rest of the gold rush tide want to visit Skagway. Several tourist parties, therefore, visited Skagway during the summer of 1898, and at least one of those groups rode the new railroad (in chairs placed on open flat cars) to the end of track. Tourists, Skagway, and the White Pass railroad have been intertwined ever since.

Tourism to Alaska and to nearby Yukon Territory remained modest until World War II. Since then, the construction of the Alaska Highway, the commencement of regular ferry service through southeast Alaska, and the advent of the modern cruise ship industry have all helped stimulate tourism. The National Park Service has played a role, too. In 1967, at the invitation of Alaska Governor Walter Hickel, the NPS began laying out plans for a proposed park that would include the two major gold rush trail corridors and several turn-of-the-century Skagway buildings. Those plans came to fruition in June 1976, when Congress passed a bill authorizing Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. The park's headquarters is now located in the former WP&YR depot and administration building, and tourists fortunate enough to take a ride on the White Pass are rewarded with a commanding view of gold rush ghost towns, trails, and other resources included within the park. The railroad, once the mainstay of the town's economy, is now operated only in the summertime. It remains, however, a defining element in the tourist's Skagway experience.

Suggested Readings

Two excellent histories of the White Pass and Yukon Route railroad, both of which include extensive passages about Skagway and the Klondike gold rush, are Ed Bearss's *Proposed Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park: Historic Resource Study* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1970), and Roy Minter's *The White Pass: Gateway to the Klondike* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1987).

Readers should also see Hard Drive to the Klondike: Promoting Seattle During the Gold Rush at <www.cr.nps.gov/history/klse/hrstoc.htm>.

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This article is a summation of the author's previous work on this topic, entitled *Legacy of the Gold Rush: An Administrative History of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park* (Anchorage: National Park Service, 1996).